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ABSTRACT

Two experiments were conducted to test the contention that the extent to which an individual maintains eye contact is differentially interpreted by different cultural groups. In the first experiment, 30 black and 30 white male subjects individually engaged in 15-minute conversations with a black male research confederate. In half of the conversations, the confederate maintained eye contact for approximately 50% of the time; in the other half, he avoided eye contact. After the conversations, the subjects completed questionnaires designed to measure how comfortable they felt during the conversation and to gauge their perception of the attention level of the confederate. The results showed that when the black confederate maintained a "normal" level of eye contact, both black and white subjects rated him as being attentive and reported feeling comfortable interacting with him. However, when the confederate avoided eye contact, white subjects rated him significantly lower in attentiveness and reported feeling significantly less comfortable. Black subjects, on the other hand, rated the confederate similarly under either condition. The second experiment replicated the first, with the exception that a white male confederate was used. The results showed significant differences between the "normal" eye contact and no eye contact conditions for white subjects on the attentiveness measure while black subjects showed essentially the same patterns of results as in the first experiment. (FI)

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THE PERCEPTION OF EYE CONTACT:

TWO EXPERIMENTS ON BLACK-WHITE DIFFERENCES

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THE PERCEPTION OF EYE CONTACT:
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Research in cross-cultural communication, and between Blacks and Whites in particular, has been conducted almost exclusively in the area of verbal communication and language. Kochman (1969), Labov (1965), Shuy (1964) and others have demonstrated that many Black people speak a variety of English not shared by others and the existence of Black English or Nonstandard Negro Dialect has been conclusively demonstrated. The implication for cross-cultural communication of such differences in linguistic codes have been extensively discussed (Labov, 1965, Shuy, 1964) and researched (Giles and Bourhis, 1976, and Buck, 1968). Research on nonverbal aspects of inter- or cross-cultural communication has been less voluminous and little systematic, empirical research evidence is yet available (See Gitter et al., 1972).

Horton (1967) and Joynson (1971) reviewed some of the nonverbal communication patterns of Blacks and indicate several instances where these Black nonverbal behaviors differ from those found in the White dominant culture. Although neither of these reviews offers any empirical evidence, they suggest ample opportunity for study by pointing out consistent differences in meaning between nonverbal cues used by Black and White communicators. In addition, Johnson (1971) also points out some of the possible consequences of the use of nonverbal symbols with unique meanings in Black-White encounters.

One area in which unique meanings are prevalent can be generally defined as visual interaction. There has been considerable research on the determinants and functions of eye contact in the communicative encounter within the dominant culture and much of the early research in this area has been synthesized in Argyle and Dean (1965). Less attention has been paid, however, to cultural differences in eye contact behavior.

The specific nonverbal visual behavior cited by Johnson (1971) is a general reluctance among Black Americans to look another person directly in the eye, especially if that person is perceived to occupy an authority position. This behavior can be contrasted with what would be desirable behavior in the dominant culture, which is to maintain eye contact. In the Black cultural context, avoiding eye contact indicates recognition of a superior-subordinate relationship. Failure to do so indicates disrespect (Johnson, 1971). Sitaram and Cogdell (1976) note eye contact avoidance to be prevalent in Asian cultures, especially Japan, and Johnson (1971) notes that it is a common pattern in Western Africa. The norm governing eye contact in Black culture then seems to be that respect and submission are indicated by aversion of the eyes; disrespect and rebellion by a direct gaze. This norm seems to be in direct contrast with the rule governing eye contact in the White culture. Maintaining eye contact is a nonverbal way of cummunicating trustworthiness, masculinity, sincerity, etc. and a dominant culture member may interpret avoidance of eye contact as: "Here is a shifty, unreliable person I am dealing with (Johnson, 1971). Within White society normal eye contact is generally perceived as positive and affiliative (Ellsworth, Carlsmith and Henson, 1972) and "a higher percentage of eye contact between communicators is typically associated with more positive attitudes between the communicators" (Mehrabian, 1969, p. 364). Once eye contact escalates into a stare (defined by Ellsworth et al. (1972) as a look or gaze which persists regardless of the behavior of the other person), the consequences generally are aggressive, negative feelings (Strom and Buck, 1976). Exline observed this nonlinear relationship between length of eye contact and direction of attitude in a questionnaire study of comfort with visual interaction. He asked subjects to indicate on an 8-point sclae how comfortable they would be with another

who...would look at the respondent 50% of the time, never, or always. Results showed that respondents anticipated the most comfort with the 50% look condition, less comfort under 100% eye contact and the least comfort when the other person never looks. In other words, comfort increases as the amount of eye contact increases from never to 50%, but decreases again as eye contact increases beyond 50%. In addition, an analysis of written description which respondents formed of such a hypothetical person indicated that the modal impression of a non-looking listener is one of rejection and personal disinterest (1974, p. 69).

Summarizing we could state that the Black culture and the White culture have specific meanings attached to eye contact and that these meanings are almost diametrically opposed. Where the avoidance of eye contact has positive overtones in Black society, it has decidedly negative meaning in White society. Efficient cross-cultural communication between Blacks and Whites would be increased then when both parties recognize these different meanings. It is posited here that Blacks, as a minority in a dominant culture, must adopt dominant culture rules regarding eye contact to promote efficient functioning within that culture upon which they depend to a large extent. As a rule, members of the dominant culture do not assimilate the minority group's rules. Blacks might hence be seen interacting with other Blacks using Black rules and interacting with Whites using White rules. In contrast, Whites would interact with Whites using White rules, and, in addition, interact with Blacks using those same White rules. Given these postulates, the nonverbal behavior of a Black person would be interpreted by Whites using White rules and by Blacks who function in White society using either set of rules. The present investigation was designed to experimentally test (at $p=.05$) the following hypotheses:

The various levels of eye contact exhibited by a Black person should be qualitatively differently interpreted by Black and White subjects in that

H1: A Black confederate's decreasing of eye contact should make subjects feel less comfortable,

H2: Should cause subjects to rate that confederates as being less attentive than under conditions of normal eye contact,

H3: That the reductions in comfort and attention ratings hould be greater for White subjects than for Black subjects.

Method

The experiment used 30 male Black and 30 male White students enrolled in a state university in New England in a 2 x 2 Anova design. The 30 White students were enrolled in an introductory Speech course; the 30 Black students were recruited by the first author through the cooperation of the Center for Black studies. After arrival at the Speech Center subjects were received by the second author (who is Black) who told Ss that they were to participate in the evaluation of an individual trained in communication skills for community action work. They were informed that they would engage in a conversation with this individual for 15 minutes, during which period the confederate and the subject would discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of on-campus vs. off-campus living arrangements and Ss participation in social activities on campus. Ss were randomly assigned to two treatment groups: Eye Contact and No Eye Contact. In the Eye Contact condition a male Black confederate (who was not personally acquainted with any of the Ss) was instructed to maintain mutual eye contact with the subjects for approximately 50% of the time. In the No Eye Contact condition he was instructed to avoid eye contact as much as possible. This assignment of Ss

resulted in four experimental groups: Black C-Black S-Eye Contact; Black C-White S-Eye Contact; Black C-Black S-No Eye Contact and finally Black C-White S-No Eye Contact. After the discussion session Ss were requested to fill out a questionnaire. The form consisted of two sets of scales, the first containing three 5-point Likert-type items designed to measure how confortable Ss felt during the conversation. The second set contained an additional three items which measured Ss perception of the attention level of the confederate. These six items were imbedded in an additional six foils.

Results

Attention. A two-way analysis of variance showed a significant effect for the Eye Contact manipulation ($F_{1,56}=16.50$, $p=.0002$) as well as a significant main effect for Ss Race ($F_{1,56}=7.17$, $p=.0097$) on how attentive the subjects rated the confederate. An inspection of the marginal means in Table 3 indicates the direction of the main effects. The No-Eye Contact condition

---- Insert Table 1 about here ----

overall yielded lower attentiveness ratings for the confederate. Similarly Whites, overall, rated the confederate lower than Blacks did. The Eye Contact X Race Interaction effect failed to reach significance ($F_{1,56}=2.72$, $p=.1047$). However, the specificity of H3 allows us to substitute the more powerful t-test for planned comparisons (See Hays, 1973, pp. 596-600). Comparing Black subjects across the two conditions of Eye Contact yields a t-value for planned comparisons of 1.64, n.s. A similar comparison for White subjects yielded a t-value of 3.64, $p=.<001$). This procedure yields a more powerful test of the interaction effect than the overall F-ratio and indicates that under conditions of No Eye Contact Whites rated the confederate lower in attentiveness than Blacks did.

Comfort. A significant main effect was obtained for the Eye Contact manipulation ($F_{1,56}$=11.30, p=.0014) as well as a significant main effect for Ss Race ($F_{1,56}$=4.48, p=.038) and a significant Eye Contact X Race interaction effect ($F_{1,56}$=10.50, p=.0059). The marginal means in Table 4 indicates lower comfort ratings under conditions of No Eye Contact and also show that Whites, in the No Eye Contact, felt less comfortable interacting with the Black confederate than Blacks did.

---- Insert Table 2 about here ----

The t-test for planned comparisons here yielded a value of .304 (p=. n.s.) for Blacks across both Eye Contact conditions, which can be compared to a t value of 3.73 (p=.<.001) for Whites on the same comparison.

Discussion

The results of this study support the contention that the extent to which an individual maintains eye contact is differentially interpreted by different cultural groups. When the Black confederate maintained a "normal" level of eye contact, both Black and White subjects rated him as being attentive and reported feeling comfortable interacting with him. But the results of our planned comparisons indicate that when the confederate avoided eye contact White subjects rated him significantly lower in attentiveness and reported feeling significantly less comfortable. Black Ss, on the other hand, rated the confederate essentially similarly on these attributes under either condition.

The social implications of these findings are quite apparent. A Black individual who does not recognize the White dominant culture's rule regarding eye contact could find his behavior quite easily misinterpreted when interacting with a White individual who is equally unaware of Black protocol.

The implications of this misinterpretation for teacher-student interaction, job interviews, etc. are quite severe, especially since in these conditions authority relations, which are seen as bringing on the specific nonverbal behavior, are much more clearly established. A Black student, acknowledging a teacher's authority by avoiding eye contact, would find him or herself characterized as unattentive or uninterested; a job applicant might be perceived as not really interested in the job. It would seem critical for Blacks in these interaction situations to be aware of White protocol, since Whites, given our data, seem to be unaware of Black rules, and incorrectly decode their behavior.

A few comments may be made here regarding our selection of the confederate and subjects. We may assume that our White college student subjects constitute a sample which, if anything, should be more sensitive to Black-White differences than the general White population. We might see even stronger reductions in ratings on dependent variables in general population samples. Our Black subjects (also college students) may be presumed to be much more familiar with White nonverbal cultural norms than their counterparts who move in circles with a much higher proportion of Blacks and fewer Whites. A non-college student sample of Blacks then might show some differences in their evaluation of the confederate when that confederate does try to maintain eye contact. The fact that the present Black subjects are familiar with both Black and White norms regarding eye contact may explain why they rated the confederate essentially similarly under either eye contact condition. Given the fact that the two sets of norms regarding eye contact are contradictory, nonverbal cues of this nature lose meaning. Since the behavior is not associated with a specific meaning it may become a poor communication device and may not be attended to by these Black subjects. Varying the amount of eye contact thus may have no effect on Blacks' evaluations because it is a cue which carries no specific meaning and hence will not be used for evaluative purposes.

Another explanation for the reason why Blacks supplied essentially the same ratings under either eye contact condition could be simply in-group attraction. Blacks may be rating a Black confederate positively no matter what level of eye contact was exhibited. Ratings of a White confederate, on the other hand, might show differences because of the absence of in-group attraction.

Yet a third reason for the results obtained may lay in the nature of the dependent variables. The first dependent variable, attention, requires the subject to form an evaluation of the confederate -- how attentive do you think the confederate was during your discussion. The second dependent variable, comfort, required the subject to form an evaluation of how he himself felt during the discussion -- how comfortable did you feel during the discussion. It would seem that looking at our results from this vantage point permits perhaps the best explanation. When our Black subjects are asked to form an evaluation of how attentive the Black confederate was, it allows an opportunity for in-group attraction to operate. Our White subjects, not pressured by in-group attraction, could rate the Black C low on attention under the No Eye Contact condition, whereas the Black subjects would be less likely to do so. When the subjects were asked how comfortable they were during the discussion with the Black confederate, a different, culturally explainable, mechanism seems to operate. Black norms for visual interaction allow for, and in some instances demand, less frequent eye contact and the No Eye contact condition would therefore not seem unusual and would not make the Black Ss feel uncomfortable, The White Ss, on the other hand, would be used to much higher levels of visual interaction and for them the No Eye Contact condition would result in them feeling quite uncomfortable. This explanation fits the obtained data rather nicely and forms the basis for a second study to test the hypotheses which implicitly flow from the above reasoning.

Experiment Two

This second experiment is an exact replica of the first experiment described above, with the major exception that in this study a White Male confederate was used, replacing the Black C from Experiment One.

The hypotheses tested in this experiment are as follows:

H1: Attention. Using the In-group attraction rationale, reducing the frequency of eye contact should result in essentially no change in White Ss' attentiveness ratings of a White confederate. Black Ss, on the other hand, should, following the same rationale, significantly reduce the attentiveness ratings of the White C, when they encounter him under the low frequency of eye contact condition, and their attentiveness ratings should be significantly lower than those given by White subjects. If on the other hand Black Ss have learned not to attend to eye contact cues, their evaluations of the White C should be unaffected.

H2: Comfort. Using the cultural norms rationale, the reduction in eye contact frequency should, for White subjects, result in a significant decrease in their ratings of how comfortable they felt while interacting with the White C. For Black subjects, however, low frequencies of eye contact should not seem unusual and therefore should have no effect on their comfort ratings. White subjects should feel significantly less comfortable than their Black counterparts. Again, if Black Ss have learned not to attend to eye contact cues, their self ratings of comfort should be unaffected.

Method

See under Method above, but note the presence of a White, rather than a Black confederate. N is the same in both studies.

Results

The specificity of the hypotheses in Experiment Two make the use of an overall F-test unnecessary (See Hays, 1973, pp. 596-597), allowing us to rely on the t-test for planned comparisons (Hays, 1973, pp. 581-605). For the sake of uniformity in reporting data, and for possible utility to the reader, ANOVA results for both dependent variables will be presented.

Attention. A two-way analysis of variance yielded a significant main effect for the Eye Contact manipulation ($F_{1,56} = 23.15$, $p = .001$), as well as a significant EC x Race interaction effect ($F_{1,56} = 5.44$, $p = .022$). The main effect for subjects' Race failed to reach significance ($F_{1,56} = 2.57$, $p = .11$) A t-test for planned comparisons (see Table 3) comparing White subjects across the two eye contact conditions yielded a significantly lower mean attentiveness rating for the White C under the No Eye Contact condition ($t = 1.76$, $p < .05$). The same t-test applied to the two groups of Black subjects indicated that these subjects also rated the White C significantly lower in the No Eye Contact condition ($t = 5.06$, $p < .01$). In addition, Black Ss in the reduced eye contact condition rated the confederate significantly lower on attention when compared with White Ss in the same condition ($t = 2.78$, $p < .05$).

These results do not exactly match the predictions made under hypothesis 1. It was predicted that White Ss would not significantly reduce their attentiveness ratings under No Eye Contact; it was observed that they did. However, Black Ss reduced their attention ratings significantly more than the White Ss, suggesting the effect of in-group attraction. This finding also indicates that the Black Ss do attend the E-C-cues.

Comfort. A significant main effect was obtained for the Eye Contact manipulation ($F_{1,56} = 8.27$, $p = .006$). The effects of subjects' Race as well as the interaction term failed to reach significance. The F-value for subjects' Race

was .013, p = .999, and the F-value of the EC x Race interaction was .119, p also .999. Table 4 indicates that comfort ratings were significantly decreased among White Ss when interacting with the White C under low EC ($t = 2.28$, $p < .05$). Our Black subjects, contrary to prediction, also showed a reduction in comfort ratings in that condition ($t = 1.79$, $p < .05$). The difference in comfort ratings between Black and White subjects in the No Eye Contact condition failed to reach statistical significance ($t = .33$, p n.s.).

Again, a rather mixed set of results. The reduction in comfort ratings given by White subjects follows the prediction. Blacks, who were predicted not to change their comfort ratings, also showed a significant difference between the two eye contact conditions. On overall test of H2, comparing the reduction in comfort ratings of Blacks against that of Whites was not statistically significant, although the results were in the predicted direction.

Discussion

The results obtained in Experiment Two do not lend unequivocal support to the in-group attraction-cultural norms hypotheses. Rather, they seem to support only a portion of these hypotheses.

In order for the in-group attraction rationale to be completely supported, we should have observed, as we did in Experiment One, a statistically non-significant difference between the Normal Eye Contact and No Eye Contact conditions for same race dyads. In experiment One, mean attention ratings for the two eye contact conditions did not differ significantly for the Black subject groups. Experiment Two, pairing White subjects with a White C showed significant differences between the Normal EC and No EC conditions for White sugjects on the attention measure. The test of the in-group attraction thus failed. Perhaps in-group attraction is stronger among Blacks than Whites in the predominantly White setting.

We suggested earlier in this paper that, based on anecdotal evidence in the research literature, among Blacks in this society frequencies of eye contact lower than those commonly observed in the dominant culture are quite common and, in fact, are sometimes demanded. We also posited that Blacks who function in predominantly White society would assimilate White cultural norms in addition to those they were socialized into as members of the Black subculture. The results from our Black subjects, a minority in a predominantly White university, would seem to support this reasoning. We also stated that members of the dominant culture typically do not assimilate the norms of subcultures. Given these basic statements, the data from the two experiments seem to indicate the following. Low frequencies of eye contact are not unusual for Blacks when interacting with other Blacks. Failure to maintain eye contact levels which are "normal" for White society does not connote a lack of attention, nor does it make conversational partners feel uncomfortable. The opposite, however, is true for our White subjects. Used as they are to a relatively high frequency of visual interaction, the lack of such does indicate reduced interest and contributes to feeling uncomfortable. This seems to explain the results of Experiment One, where reducing eye contact had essentially no impact on Blacks' ratings of confederate attention level ratings, and it did not make them uncomfortable. The opposite was observed for White subjects, who rated the Black confederate as quite inattentive and were quite uncomfortable.

In Experiment Two where we paired Black and White subjects with a White confederate a different picture emerges. Here our White subjects, used to relatively high frequencies of visual interaction, responded "properly" to the nonverbal cue of reduced eye contact. They showed significant reductions in both attention levels as well as the level of comfort they experienced.

Our Black subjects showed essentially the same pattern of results; significant reductions in the means of both dependent variables when the frequency of eye contact was reduced. There are, however, some fine, but nontheless important, differences between the two similar patterns of responses. The Black subject rated the White confederate significantly lower on attention than did their White counterparts. They were, in this case, using the White rules for decoding the connotation of little visual interaction, and their ratings were not inhibited by the operation of in-group attraction. However, since Black subjects under most circumstances are more accustomed to low levels of visual interaction, it fails to make them unduly uncomfortable, hence the reduction in comfort levels equal to that of the White Ss. Following this course of reasoning, the only place we might have detected any effect of in-group attraction in Experiment 2 would be among the White subjects, where the reductions in attention

levels may have been partially offset by in-group attraction.

We should note that the use of a Black experimenter in both experiments may have influenced the results in unknown ways. Further research should include race of experimenter as a variable to determine its effects. Also, this study employed male subjects; future studies should investigate the effects of gender as well as race.

In a more pragmatic light we could add the following to our comments presented earlier in our discussion of the results of Experiment One. Experiment Two seems to indicate that Blacks, or at least those who have a bi-cultural orientation, such as our subjects, do interpret reduced visual interaction as meaning a lack of attention when it is manifested by Whites. They may not, however, be affected by this lack of attention the same degree as White subjects are. There is some evidence, in the two experiments, that their level of comfort in interacting is less affected by reduced visual interaction. Whereas White subjects in interacting with Blacks in the No Eye Contact condition

reported feeling quite uncomfortable (in fact, their comfort score was the lowest of both experiments), Black Ss scores in interacting with a White Confederate were significantly higher. This might mean that Blacks might be less threatened by this behavior, and might therefore be less prone to defensive reactions to feelings of discomfort.

Further research in this area might profitably focus on the area of bi-cultural norm orientation. A major premise of our discussion has been that our Black subjects are familiar with two sets of norms concerning this particular nonverbal behavior. Samples of Blacks who have less constant exposure to White society relative to our sample of college students might show differences in their evaluations of confederates when those confederates, contrary to norm, do try to maintain eye contact. Here we might expect a reduction in comfort scores because the confederate might be perceived as engaging in inappropriate behavior. Also, such subjects may not interpret low eye contact in the White confederates as indicating inattention.

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Attention, Black Confederate

		EYE CONTACT	
		normal	no eye contact
SUBJECT RACE	BLACK	12.66_a	10.93_a
	WHITE	11.93_a	7.80

a) cells with common subscripts are not significantly different from one another at $p<.05$. Means can range from 3-15.

Table 2. Mean ratings of Comfort, Black Confederate

		EYE CONTACT	
		normal	no eye contact
SUBJECT RACE	BLACK	12.33_a	12.06_a
	WHITE	12.72_a	9.40

a) cells with common subscripts are not significantly different from one another at $p<.05$. Means can range from 3-15.

Table 3. Mean Ratings of Attention, White Confederate

		EYE CONTACT	
		Normal	no eye contact
SUBJECT RACE	WHITE	12.60_a	11.46
	BLACK	12.93_a	9.66

a) Cells with common subscripts are not significantly different from one another at $p<.05$. Means can range from 3-15.

Table 4. Mean Ratings of Comfort, White Confederate

		EYE CONTACT	
		Normal	No eye contact
SUBJECT RACE	WHITE	12.73_a	10.86_b
	BLACK	12.60_a	11.13_b

a,b) Cells with common subscripts are not significantly different from one another at $p<.05$. Means can range from 3-15.

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